

Homesteading Comes to an End Video Transcript

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Title: The Homestead Act 1862-2012: Homesteading Comes to an End

Date: April, 2011

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ROBERT. In 1862, the Homestead Act was passed and the last day, technically, that people could file for a homestead was just before midnight on October the 21st of 1976. And that's a long time. That's a period of 114 years that it was available in principal, but in actuality it was not available quite that long because by the time you get in to the 1970s and '60s there was very little land that was available for homesteading.

ROBERT. And it twilighted in 1976 with legislation that repealed all of the, then existing, homestead acts, with one exception. The exception was it allowed those to be applicable to Alaska for another ten years. So the last fling, as it were, of homesteading was in Alaska.

ROBERT. The last homestead transferred in the United States to a person who complied with all of the requirements, at that moment, for homesteading was to a man by the name of Kenneth Deardorff, who received a tract of just under 50 acres of land in the western central part of Alaska near Lime Village which is not connected by roads or anything, which made his accessing the land not at all easy.

ROBERT. And his land was awarded in May of 1988 and he had made claims to the land in the later '70s, so his land was pending for about 10 years, and one of the reasons that his claim or his patent was not issued until 1988 was strictly because it was his land was so remote that before it could be transferred to him with a patent, it had to be surveyed. And so it's not easy to bring survey crews to such remote areas. And so, he has the distinction of being the last person, in part, because of the difficulty of bringing survey crews out to survey his land.

ROBERT. Historians more recently have debated exactly how many homesteads were awarded in the United States. Probably the most commonly cited number is 800,000. Also a question is how many people actually tried to homestead, because 800,000 is sort of a best estimate in terms of those that were actually granted as homesteads, but two-million is generally seen as the best cited number for those attempts at homesteading. If you do the math it's about a 40 percent success rate.

ROBERT. Sometimes historians today would like to point out that there was, at times that there was, a lot of fraud that happened. And I don't know, I don't think anybody has quite quantified what a lot of fraud is. There probably has never been a law, federal, state or anything else that's been passed that some people haven't tried to find benefits for it that probably weren't envisioned by the law signers, and so people, yes, there were instances, and several, of people that were using homestead legislation to gain tracts of land without the real intent of keeping that land for the purposes that homesteading was all about. And money has always been a way that people have, well, corrupted the intent of laws.

ROBERT. And so sometimes homestead legislation was not, it didn't serve the ultimate goal of at least for a private family creating a farm, but still even in those cases, it was a particular law, for a particular time, in a particular culture, and I think it did remarkably well apart from the fraud and sometimes abuse of the law.

ROBERT. But in terms of its larger purpose, if you step back, I think that the Homestead Act was an absolutely remarkable piece of legislation and part of why we're Americans today and the nature of the country is a direct response to this law. It was that important for shaping American as it is today.

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